How To: Create a Healthy City

By Alyssa Calomeni

Diversity is the essential element for creating a healthy city. This variance does not have to be racial or cultural, solely "experiential" diversity is necessary. "Experiential" diversity refers to the different experiences of people in general. Such as where they grew up, childhood experiences and any problems that they have faced in their lives that made them the person they are today. All people grow up differently and face different events in their lives which affect the way they act and problem solve. When all of these

different people come together, and feel welcome to speak their minds this "experiential" diversity becomes the forte of the society. And what better place is there for a large group of people with different life observations to come together than in a city.

New York City during Summer Streets, no cars are on the roads.

An important aspect that is essential to this equation is communication. All the different ideas and solutions in the world mean nothing if there is a closed forum in which people feel uncomfortable speaking their minds. In conjunction with these articulations there needs to be debates, honest considerations and revisements to make a reasonable solution and plan of action for each area. A video created by Peak Moment on the movement called City Repair stresses this importance. There was a comment made that said "affecting permanent culture begins with transformation of human

relationships"(City Repair). When people start to see each other as resources and not separate themselves, the city will change from the inside out.

When it comes to the health of the environment, so many people consider cities "the problem." Cities are hotspots of heterogeneity, with all their potential for communication, great and revolutionary ideas blossom. When the mayor of Easton spoke, he said that there is nothing like the relationships you have with people when you are literally living on top of them (Panto).

An example of a cornerstone healthy city is Portland Oregon. In a video clip of this city called "Intersection Repair" it is obvious that open discussion is prevalent. It shows how a block of people came together to solve problems that they were having with the traffic where they all live. Some one came up with the decision to paint a bright sunflower in the middle of one of their busy intersections. There was some form of organization to make this painting happen and it created an exponential growth in the amount of art in their neighborhood (Eckerson). People had seen the advantages that this had in solving their traffic problem as well as it made them feel pride in their block. Afterwards everyone wanted to get involved as well.

The difference between this city and other cities of its kind stems from the idea of nature versus nurture. A lot of very interesting studies have been done on this topic. The debate consists of the conflicting ideas on what is more important in the development of an individual, is it their genes or is it the situations an individual needs to overcome and the events that have forever changed their lives that makes a person act and think the way they do.

This idea can be seen in the deviations between a city like Easton and a City like New York for example. If you live in an area like the westward in Easton, you grow up where the environment is not cherished, art and creativity is not desired. You wake up everyday walking down plain stark streets. This is shown in juxtaposition to someone who grew up in New York City. Everywhere there is innovation and beauty. If two twins with the same genetic makeup lived in these two opposing areas they would think very differently. One place would allow their imagination to grow while the other would cause a lack of originality and desire for change. In Richard Florida's book Who's YOUR City? He says, "The choice of where to live, therefore, is not an arbitrary one. It is arguably the most important decision we make, as important as choosing a spouse or a career. In fact, place exerts powerful influence over the jobs and careers we have access to, the people we meet and our "mating markets" and our ability to lead happy and fulfilled lives" (Florida). Florida actually did research on this idea and his findings greatly support the idea of nurture in opposition to nature.

So how do you actually go about creating a healthy city like New York or Portland? There needs to be discussions where everyone feels comfortable and welcomed. To create this sense of ease it is important to have a common meeting area for everyone who wants to get involved to meet. Within this meeting there should be someone who compiles a list of all the issues that everyone currently has with their city. This list would include not just people of one socioeconomic class but, people from all socioeconomic backgrounds so that they could discuss what they specifically need and want.   Once this problem list is compiled, small groups should be formed to address each one of the issues. In small groups people who are less inclined to speak in a large group

setting would feel more inclined to voice their opinion. Within these small groups people

from all different walks of life could come up with a master plan to solve each of the

problems. People who work in art fields and people with science backgrounds could

combine their expertise to create a plan of action that is feasible.

Even if initially the number of people in these meetings is small more people will

eventually want to join in when the solutions to the problems are implemented. Which

leads to another point, like many ideas for improvement of cities, the ideas tend to get

tangled in legislature. It is important for the people who are coming up with the solutions

not to be all about talk but also act in a timely manner. Again, in the Portland video clip

the people painting the street did not wait for their proposal to go through the

government. They took initiative and just did it (Eckerson)! Sometimes in order to get

something accomplished there needs to be movement instead of waiting. When others

see the successes and benefit by the solutions they will want to join in as well and this

small initial group will grow. It is human nature not to want to be the first person to put

their neck on the line but in a group people feel empowered and stronger than they would

alone.

With people coming from multifarious backgrounds, the city can become

something for everyone. If people put their heads together and work as a group striving

for the same goals, the city can accommodate everyone's wants and needs. From a recent

walk in Philadelphia it is obvious that there is stratification. For example on Spruce

Street and many of the streets near the Independence National Historic Park only people

who can afford the gorgeous brick apartments with marble stairs and cobble sidewalks

will be able to live there but this does not have to mean that some people in Philadelphia will have to live in unbearable or even dangerous conditions.

In Thomas Friedman's book Hot, Flat and Crowded, he says that one of the trends of people today is what he calls a "nation-building at home." He says, "While Washington may be gridlocked and drift sideways, and our economic management has been anything but responsible, our country is still exploding with innovators and idealists" (Friedman 9). It is not for a lack of experimentation and invention that has made some cities unhealthy. The limiting factor to this equation is diversity and communication. These two ingredients are necessary in the recipe for a healthy city, a city in which there is an outflow of new solutions.

Ultimately, in order for a city to be healthy there needs to be diversity in the experiences of those who live there. These people need to be able to speak their minds and actually have their thoughts heard and translated into a plan. With these two factors every city will become healthy. The cities will not remain stagnant and decaying. There will be movement towards solutions to their problems.

SustainLane Presents: The 2008 US City Rankings

A website called Sustain Lane: Discover. Discuss. Decide. (a motto much like our own) recently did a study on Green Cities in the U.S. They based their rankings on 8 different categories.

1. Air and Water Quality
2. City Programs
3. Waste Management
4. Transportation
5. Green Biz and Economy
6. Water Supply
7. Built Environment
8. Natural disaster Risk

A subgroup of City Programs is Knowledge/ Communications. Feel free to look into this website further at www.sustainlane.com/us-city-rankings/

Under this subcategory the cities were rated on aspects like. . . does this city have a plan for sustainability, does it have an environmental department specifically focused on sustainability efforts, has the city worked with a research laboratory and lastly has the whole city been involved in sustainability not just a neighborhood.

Rankings

1. Portland, OR
1. Seattle, WA
1. New York, NY
4. San Francisco, CA
4. Minneapolis, MN
4. Los Angeles, CA
4. Denver, CO
4. Columbus, OH
9. Phoenix, AZ
10. Albuquerque, NM

One of the cities tied for number 1 Portland, Oregon

NAME THE CITY!

A

B

C

D

D

E

Check your answers on page 4

8 Ways to Green Your Town

1) Organize a group meeting in your town
2) Create eco-friendly art
3) Plant a garden
4) Write a letter to your representative lobbying for more pedestrian friendly side walks
5) Then walk!
6) Plant a tree
7) Clean up trash
8) Don't wait do something!

Answers: A Philadelphia, B Easton, C New York City, D Philadelphia, E Philadelphia